

Two Men and Their Houses

Tales of restorations



David Dropkin and Greg Evans are often teased for following the example set in *Under the Tuscan Sun*. In fact, Italy has had the same effect on its visitors for centuries – think of Frederic II, the German-born 12th century Holy Roman Emperor who chose out-of-the-way Puglia as the seat of his realm, and peppered the region with fortresses.

Bound by jobs and lacking armies, most of us have to settle for a temporary fix, in a rental villa; a fortunate few can plunge deeper and own a second home under the sun. This is more easily said than done, as buying and owning property in Italy entails navigating through a complicated legal system and, generally, restoring an artistically crumbling ruin.

In 2001, Tuscany Now established a real estate division in partnership with a Tuscan architect, Marco Vigni, and his family-owned restoration firm, Studio Tecnico Vigni. The company offers a range of services specifically tailored to those who wish to purchase, restore and manage a property in Tuscany or Umbria while living elsewhere.

These are the stories of two men, both long-standing Tuscany Now clients, who took the plunge. Their houses are available for rent, when not in use by their owners, through Tuscany Now.

Il Granaio Castelfalfi, Tuscany

In a span of four years, Greg Evans has thrown aside a career in finance, restored a farmhouse in Tuscany and established himself as an ambassador of sorts for Italy in Princeton, New Jersey.

In September 2001, after a week at our Casa al Monte in Tuscany, Mr. Evans and his wife Suzanne returned to New York just in time for the collapse of the World Trade Centre. A narrow escape – Mrs. Evans had commuted through the building minutes before the first plane struck – spurred the couple to do something about the resolutions they had made on another, earlier trip to Italy: to buy their own home under the Tuscan sun and to devote themselves “at some point” to helping the small, family-run businesses they had come to know in Italy bring their fine, hand-crafted products to the United States.

During their September holiday, the Evanses had arranged with Tuscany Now’s real estate division to visit several properties for sale in the area to the west of Florence. One in particular had appealed to them, a 200-year old abandoned farmhouse known as Il Granaio near the hill towns of Castelfalfi and Ghizzano. The property included 5 acres/2ha of land with rolling fields on all sides, and had once been part of a vast Medici-

owned estate called Casadorna. The building itself, although roofless, had solid walls and foundations, an attractive interior layout defined by archways, a large area that would make a wonderful kitchen, an ancient pizza oven and, best of all, sweeping views over a spectacular countryside. Compared to their base at Casa al Monte, in the heart of the well-travelled Chianti region, the location seemed a bit remote and so they hesitated...

Within five months of the World Trade Centre disaster, Mr. Evans had bought the ruin;



within seven months, the budget and plans for its restoration had been finalised and the work had begun. To manage the project Mr. Evans engaged architect/*geometra* Marco Vigni and Studio Tecnico Vigni, both based in nearby San Gimignano.



No structural problems were encountered, and for the first few months Mr. Evans was comfortable monitoring progress via emailed weekly reports and photos. The restoration was to reuse as many of the materials original to the house as possible, including stones and old wooden beams, and to leave internal stone walls exposed if their condition allowed. A little barn next to the main house was to be converted at the same time into a guest house with a games room on the lower floor.



The second stage of the restoration entailed a trip to Italy, and an expensive trip it proved to be: the 250-year old terracotta tiles the Evanses chose for the ground floor of the house had not been in the initial budget, nor had the antique stone mantelpiece purchased for the living room or Philippe Starck fixtures and marble fittings for the bathrooms. The radiant underfloor heating – a rarity in Italy – was an unbudgeted extravagance, too, but a much-appreciated feature in cool weather. The landscaping of the gardens was settled during the visit, as was the design and location of the swimming pool.



This visit also gave the couple a chance to explore the surroundings of their new property. Although well off the tourist track – the local villages are more authentically Italian, the traffic always light – it lies less than half an hour's drive from San Gimignano, Volterra and Pisa, and under an hour from both Florence and the coast.



Four months later it was back to Italy again, this time to choose kitchen appliances and lighting fixtures, and to get started on the painting and decorating. Studio

Tecnico Vigni had lined up samples and catalogues to simplify the process. The Evanses engaged the painters themselves, friends from a previous trip, who launched into the project as soon as the plaster was dry. Landscape murals appeared on some walls, others were more simply decorated in warm Tuscan colours.

In the meantime, Mr. Evans had resigned his position in finance/management consultancy and was well on his way to fulfilling the second part of the couple's old dream: a shop and showroom in Princeton offering fine Italian crafts on a retail and wholesale basis. The list of suppliers amassed for this new venture naturally served as well for the furnishing of Il Granaio, and a local antiques dealer was recruited to scour the area for unusual pieces.

Now fully restored and beautifully decorated, the house has been featured in several publications, including *European Homes and Gardens* and *Worth/Robb Report*. Mr. Evans calculates that his restoration cost a little more than three times his initial purchase price, not including furnishings, kitchen appliances or fees, or about US\$221/£114 per square foot (€1800 per square metre). "The estimates provided by Studio Tecnico Vigni at the beginning of the works were very accurate," he says. Surprises were largely due to price differences between Italy and the United States: "The fitted kitchen at Il Granaio, with its cherrywood cabinets and marble and stainless steel counters, would have cost almost \$100,000 in the States; we paid the equivalent of about \$18,000."

The project took almost two years to complete, primarily because the Evanses wanted to be involved at every stage of the process, "and frankly, we were too slow in making decisions." No restoration tale would be complete without a dose of disasters, but these were relatively minor. When the antique mantelpiece, selected for the beautiful patina on its surface, was delivered to the house, the workers took it upon themselves to surprise the Evanses by sandblasting it to make it look new. "To an Italian, everything is better if it's new," chuckles Mr. Evans, "and something that is only a couple of hundred years old doesn't qualify as an antique." During a rainy spell a section of the garden collapsed, sinking a foot or two in an area – well away from the house - where a pit for farm waste had existed a century or so ago.

With Il Granaio finished and the shop, called Tuscan Hills, up and running, Mr. Evans has since added to his portfolio of fine Italian products by taking on the local agency for both Tuscany Now rentals and TN Real Estate. Several restoration projects are already under way and their American owners benefit from Mr. Evans' management and interior design expertise coupled with Studio Tecnico Vigni's construction know-how.

Vetricone San Gemini, Umbria

For ten years, beginning in 1995, the Dropkin family migrated annually to Italy for a week's holiday at a Tuscany Now property. The idea of buying and restoring their own farmhouse in Tuscany took hold in Year Six; by Year Eight, the perfect ruin had been found and purchased – in Umbria. In June 2005, the family will be spending their first holiday in their new/old house, tucked into a glen just below the medieval village of San Gemini in southern Umbria.

David Dropkin, a London-based interior designer with a specialty in commercial spaces, set out with three prerequisites in mind for his house: a location within a 90-minute drive of an airport with frequent direct flights from London; a secluded setting, well off the tourist track, with a great view, and a building with good old bones of no more than 200 square metres/2100 square feet.



The search began around Asciano, a beautiful old town in the heart of Tuscany's *creta senese*, the sparsely populated limestone hills to the south-east of Siena. The area fit the bill perfectly in terms of access, seclusion and vistas. But the available

properties were all much too large.



Enter Michele Grandjacquet, the energetic owner/restorer of two properties in the Tuscany Now portfolio, Santi Terzi and Casa del Poggio, who'd heard of Mr. Dropkin's plight through the company grapevine. There was an abandoned farmhouse down a little road just below his properties, which, although not formally on the market - and not in Tuscany - fit the bill in every other way...



The farmhouse turned out to be an agglomeration of three tumbledown buildings: a stable with the farmer's living quarters above (a typical arrangement which made use of the rising heat generated by the animals), a *cantina* for storing wine and olive oil and a shed for farm tools. With 3.75ha/9 acres of land, the house - or what was left of it - overlooked its own meadows with a clear view of the valley in front, thick woods behind and nary a neighbour in sight. It was indeed a ruin but one with graceful lines and a deep sense of history and peace, neither too big nor too cramped for a family of three with a long list of expectant houseguests. And it lay a five-minute drive from the motorway to Rome, and within hiking distance of two of Umbria's best-kept secrets - San Gemini, a wonderfully unaffected hill town with Roman origins, and Portaria, a tiny village surmounted by a castle.



The Dropkin family was smitten. It took a year to purchase the property, draw up the restoration plans and obtain the permits, all of which had to be accomplished at a distance, from London, with only a smattering of Italian on Mr. Dropkin's part and none whatsoever on the part of the local officials. For that,



and for facilitating the project as a whole, Mr. Dropkin credits the bilingual Michele Grandjacquet, without whose charm, savvy and perseverance Vetricone might still be a forlorn heap of old stones.

At least half the team's efforts went into turning the neighbours' entrenched mistrust of foreigners into something resembling cooperation, if not friendship. The skies cleared somewhat when locals learned that the old farmhouse was to remain, for all intents and purposes, a farmhouse. The clouds parted permanently when it was learned that a team comprised entirely of local residents had been hired, and that Mr. Dropkin was insisting that every scrap of building material be sourced from the immediate area (the only 'imported' materials are the chestnut beams – milled 50km/30 miles away). Carlo, the nearest neighbour, has been recruited to manage and process the property's 50 olive trees, and another neighbour's small herd of dairy cows has been given the responsibility of keeping the grass down in the far meadow (with some help from their owner and his tractor).

When I visited the site in October 2004, those old stones had already been neatly incorporated into a brand-new façade, with matching materials supplied by local quarries. In the process, the builders had discovered that many the stones had been cut with Roman tools – no surprise in an area littered with remnants of the empire. The roof was on – tiled, as it would have been originally - and the interior layout was taking advantage of the old building's many levels to create three very private suites.

The Italian workers told me that Mr. Dropkin was a stickler for detail, and he readily admits it – after all, he is a designer by profession. Digital photos, sketches and comments were exchanged almost daily by email and visits were made whenever major decisions required it. “The house,” he says, “will look and feel like an old house, except that it's designed for a man who's six-foot-two and loves to cook.” And entertain, too, evidently, as the living room is far larger than you'd expect for a three-bedroom house and the dining table, now in place, seats twelve. Other non-traditional features are the large windows and the outdoor living areas connected to the house, including one with a wood oven and a barbeque in what was originally a sheltered pig pen; and, of course, the swimming pool, set on its own terrace in the garden. The interior design will be “transitional,” as he describes it, or a tastefully eclectic blend of antique Umbrian and comfortable contemporary.

Have there been glitches in the process? Ah, yes, but surprisingly few, given the number of best sellers featuring wry accounts of Italian restorations. There was the unfortunate discovery that the construction estimates didn't include the kitchen appliances, which, in Italy, are considered items of furniture. And the weather's been uncooperative, with Umbria suffering the coldest, snowiest winter in recorded history, setting the interior plastering and the landscaping back several weeks.

All in all, though, Mr. Dropkin seems to have thoroughly enjoyed the process and has preserved his faith in Tuscany Now. His main pursuits in Italy at this time are ferreting out the best antiques shops in Umbria (we hope he'll share his findings) and negotiating with the local authorities to have an ADSL internet line brought in from San Gemini – a long-term prospect. He calculates that by the time Vetricone is finished, complete with

furnishings, the cost will have been between four and five times the purchase price or €1600-1800 per square metre (£104-117 or US\$201-227 per square foot), not including project management and notary fees or landscaping.

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